

Grit 'n' Grace — THE PODCAST

Episode #267: Seeing Our Invisible God in an Uncertain World

Cheri

Let's be honest: It's difficult to love, know, and serve an invisible God.

Amy

It's especially hard in uncertain times when He's nowhere in sight... when He seems to have vanished.

Cheri

In today's episode, I am sitting solo in the interview-**ER** chair, digging for solutions to this dilemma with interview-**EEs** Amy Carroll *and* Lynn Cowell, co-authors of the new Bible study, ***Esther: Seeing Our Invisible God in an Uncertain World***.

Amy

We're not the only women who have faced this challenge, so listen in for some ancient and reliable truths!

Cheri

Well, this is Cheri Gregory ...

Amy

... and I'm Amy Carroll

Cheri

and you're listening to Grit 'n' Grace: THE PODCAST that equips you to lose who you're NOT, love who you ARE, and live your ONE life well.

Amy

Once again, we're talking with Lynn Cowell ...

Cheri

... and Amy Carroll! Who are **co-authors** of ***Esther: Seeing Our Invisible God in an Uncertain World.***

Amy

Lynn Cowell is part of the Proverbs 31 Ministries' speaker and writing teams. She is the author of several books, writing for women of all ages. Lynn calls home North Carolina, where she and her husband, Greg, and the occasional backyard deer are adjusting to life as "just us". Along with their three adult children, the Cowells love hiking, cooking, and anything combining chocolate and peanut butter.

Cheri

Amy Carroll finds delight in gathering a community of women with tender hearts and strong voices. She's a speaker and writer for Proverbs 31 Ministries, a speaker coach, and the author of *Breaking Up with Perfect* and *Exhale*. A woman who adores a great story and a challenging idea, Amy has branded co-hosting the Grit 'n' Grace the Podcast "one of my favorite things." Amy and her husband live in lovely Holly Springs, NC where you can find her on any given day texting her adult kids, typing away at her computer, or trying to figure out one more alternative to cooking dinner.

Amy

What do you do when God seems to have vanished?

Cheri

When you have a decision to make, when your stability is shaken, when your sure-fire plan fails—when everything is spinning out of control...

Amy

Esther is the perfect partner for seeing our invisible God in uncertainty.

Cheri

Though she lived centuries ago, *Esther* speaks to us when we run into limited control and resources.

Amy

We find in her a strength and fortitude you and I need today. A strength we discover as we follow her process of listen, feel, do, and speak.

Cheri

We'll see that Esther carved a pathway, not only with faith but with influence, for all women who find themselves walking through uncertainty.

Amy:

Esther: Seeing Our Invisible God in an Uncertain World is a six-week, in-depth study of the book of Esther. It's a gritty dive into a woman's story that teaches us to:

- * Listen to wise people who fill our gaps of understanding

Cheri

- * Embrace your feelings as a catalyst for God-directed action.

Amy

- * Do the work God assigns you even when in doubt.

Cheri

- * Speak up with confidence, knowing that God has a place for your voice in His story.

Amy

This study guide includes biblical and historical background insights, Bible study, practical application, and questions for reflection.

Cheri

You also have a free resource for those of us who order during the month of July — tell us about it!

Amy

Digger Deeper into Esther is a resource to accompany the Bible study for those who like to go deeper yet. You can find all about it and the book at <https://estherbookstudy.com/>

Cheri Gregory

All right, well, I am excited to be in the interviewer's chair all by myself. I almost said all by my lonesome, but that's not true. I have two of my favorite people, just in general to talk to, and whose writing I love to read. And it is very, very exciting. And I will not tease Amy about cheating on me or anything like that by collaborating with somebody else.

Amy Carroll

(Laughs) Well, you do too!

Cheri Gregory

Yeah, like, you know, total hypocrisy here. So, wonderful, wonderful to have you both here, Amy and Lynn. So I hear that there's a story, there has to be a story about how you came to write *Esther: Seeing our Invisible God in an Uncertain World*. So tell our friends who are listening all about it.

Lynn Cowell

Well, it's kind of funny, Cheri, because this extra Bible study actually came out of a pile of rejection letters of which a lot of us are very familiar with. But that's not really where the story began. The beginning was several years ago in the everyday friendship conversations that Amy and I were having. And Amy began sharing with me a process that she was learning and writing about: listen, feel, do speak. And y'all maybe have heard her talk about it here even. I think that Amy thought that this was an Amy process, and I think I did too. But then one day, while I was reading my Bible, I saw that this process being played out in the life of one of the characters I was reading, and that was Esther. And I couldn't wait to tell Amy that this process that God gave her He didn't just give to Amy, that it was in fact a process that his people have been going through for a really long time. In fact, just the other day, I was reading in Acts and I saw the same process in the life of Peter in Acts 10. So listen, feel, do, speak isn't just an Amy thing. It's an all of us thing. And it's a practice that we can develop as we're learning new things about and with God.

Cheri Gregory

Okay, I'm over here grinning big, because I think it's just so exciting. So Amy, when you heard from Lynn, how did you react to that?

Amy Carroll

Well, okay, I was astonished. And it's funny because Lynn, even now, like last week, she sent me a text. She said, "I found listen, feel, do, speak *again!*" And she found it in the book of Acts. And she said it's her favorite now. And so it was just so astonishing to me, it shouldn't be, right? It's not that God gives any one of us something completely unique. It's always truth that's woven into His word. And so I was just so excited.

But have to confess here that I was a little dismayed that she found it first in the book of Esther, because true confessions, I have never felt drawn in any way shape or form to the book of Esther. (Laughs) But seeing it in that light, through something God had already done in my life and going, "Oh, this is a pattern God uses with His people." Then I started to fall in love with the book of Esther. So, you know, the process for me first came to pass when I was beginning, even on Grit'N'Grace, right here with Lucretia Berry, and diving into this racial equity space. And God gave me this like "Amy, slow down," because I'm, you know, I'm word girl, I want to rush in with all the words and tell people all the things, you know, and, and He's like, "Slow down, listen, listen to Me, listen to other people's stories," you know, and so forth through that process.

And so God's given us all this process, especially when we're in uncertain times. And I think when we're in uncertain times, we tend to shut down. And a lot of times in those times, it really does seem like God has vanished. But He has promised to never leave us or forsake us. So when we can't really hear His voice or can't feel His presence, we can start watching for His hand through these processes and see Him there. And when we do, counterintuitively, because we feel like when we're a mess, we can't make any difference in our world; but it's those times that kind of humble us, and that we can become really probably major influencers in our world and we can start to use our influence when we start to see God and then point to God in these uncertain places.

Cheri Gregory

I love that. Okay, so Amy, you said that Esther wasn't your favorite book. I'm guessing you didn't grow up throwing a a bedsheet around your shoulders and parading down the the hallway pretending to be Queen Esther. Lynn, how about you? What were your feelings about the book of Esther? Were you pro, con, somewhere in between before you guys got started on this?

Lynn Cowell

You know, I'm a lot like Amy. I think that some of the some of the things that we have done to this book, we've really Hollywood-ized it. We really Hollywood-ized the book of Esther, and have made it seen – we've talked about it being a beauty pageant, which it wasn't even close to anything like that. And we've made it into a book that I really don't think that the book really is. And so maybe it is because of what we've done to the book of Esther that I haven't been attracted to it in the past.

Amy Carroll

We both think that it's like, it felt a little too Disney princess, for us. (Laughs)

Cheri Gregory

(Laughs) I love that. I love that. Okay, love your candor. So you say you've found that the book of Esther is controversial. So unpack that for us. Like, I'll go ahead and confess I'm going to be the odd woman out here because I did grow up thinking Queen Esther was my role model. I am the one who, when I stripped my bed, would throw the bedsheet around my shoulders and hold my head high. And because that was the one time it was acceptable to be to be on display as long as you were pretending to be Queen Esther, now that I think about it. So controversy. Unpack the controversy for our friends who are listening, and for me.

Amy Carroll

Well, it is really a fascinating book. And when you start digging into it, because Linda and I study for months. We studied individually, we studied, we talked together, we debated things, we read a lot of commentators, even some of our most respected commentators really, really disagree about the book of Esther, and especially the motivations of the people in the book of Esther, because like the name of God, the name of God is never spoken or written in the Book of Esther. It's one of two books in the Bible that that's true. So that in and of itself makes it controversial.

And honestly, there's a lot of sex and violence in Esther. And so it doesn't make for a great Sunday school class. Yes, we have a veggie version of Esther, and that's appropriate for children. But we've kind of brought that into our adult way of thinking, too. And one of the reviews from our early readers that Lynn and I really, really just delighted in. She said – this is our friend Cecile Vilorio, she said, "This is the nitty gritty Esther, stripped of glamour and presented in truth." That's what she said about our study. And we were like, "YES!" Because that that really

is the truth about the book. Martin Luther disliked the book so much that he said he wished it had never existed. We have that quote in the study.

And so it's nitty gritty, there's sex and violence, and it's actually more epic than any Hollywood movie, and yet we've softened it. So to me, that is one of the things that is controversial for me now, because I think we have this desire, this really unhealthy desire in the church, particularly maybe in this time, that we want heroes, and we want villains. But the truth is, is we all have the capability to be the hero, and we all have the tendency to be a villain, like every single one of us has great heroism that we could accomplish. And we also have great villainy, that we're more capable in our worst nightmares of accomplishing.

And so what we've done is we've cleaned up these characters – I call it applying spiritual Clorox, we've applied spiritual Clorox to the book of Esther, and so we've stripped it of its power, because these are all people that have both good and bad in them. Every single character – Haman is a little bit harder to find the good in in this story, but the rest of them, they're a mix of both.

And here's the problem. And this is what I'm just so passionate to talk about this. When we create heroes and villains, we do two terrible things that are kind of opposite ends of the spectrum as Christians and we are seeing this play out right now with the report coming out about the SBC. It keeps us from keeping our leaders accountable because we've – they're heroes. And so what we do is instead of keeping them accountable, we protect them. Because we have to protect that vision of them as a hero. We see that with Esther!

So Lynn, just last week, she found this, she was looking for some resources online. Just what are people saying about Esther and this is a quote that she found. "It's a romantic story. Romance novels are full of stories like this." That is astounding and horrifying! Because it's actually more a story of human trafficking than it is of – it's not a romance story. Esther had no choice in the situation. So when we create these heroes, and put them up on pedestals, we don't keep them accountable.

And on the opposite end of it, we aren't ready to give grace to villains, because – and Jesus did that, for you, and for me, and for every villain that's ever lived on the planet, He has given grace. So you know, it's just, it's a really destructive pattern not to look reality in the eye, and call things what they are, and, you know, all people are capable of great good and terrible cruelty.

Can you tell I'm passionate about it? (Laughs)

Cheri Gregory

You know, I'm just getting a just a slight whiff of that, Amy. Ever so slight. So I love your subtitle. Of course, it's called Esther, but *Seeing our Invisible God in an Uncertain World*. I mean, this just feels so timely. You know, this whole idea of uncertainty and how God can feel invisible at times. So would each of you tell us about a time in your life when God seemed to have vanished? And what was that like for you?

Lynn Cowell

So when I was 26, my dad was diagnosed with stage four non-Hodgkins lymphoma. So right from the very beginning, it was stage four. And at the time, I was a young mom with two little children. And it really just didn't seem fair to me. It didn't seem fair to me that, in so many ways, I didn't feel all grown up yet. And for certain, it appeared that my children would never have a relationship with their Grandpa Louis. And I remember one day in particular, Greg had stayed with our children so that I could go and spend time with my father in the hospital. And it was the eve of my birthday. And I was, you know, sitting there in the hospital, next to my dying father. And it was just such an uncertain time for me, like, what about my mother? I thought that she was way too young to be a widow. What would the future hold for her being by herself? And I knew that my father would soon be with his father. But that didn't erase the pain that his departing from this earth would cause me and my family. But God knew the future. And He knew He would take care of my mother. And He knew that as a family, we would all grow more dependent on God, without having my father with us. He knew just how He would work it out. Like the Book of Esther, you know, once we read through the Book of Esther, we know her story, and we know it worked out well. But like us, when she was in the middle of that, she didn't have that assurance that it was all going to work out.

Amy Carroll

Right. I mean, and I love Lynn's story there because every story does not get tied up in a pretty pink bow. Esther's did. Some stories don't. But what can we do with the uncertainty? And it was interesting, Lynn and I, she challenged me last week to take a spiritual test, a spiritual gifts inventory again, and I hadn't done that in a long time. And she has a new one that's added to hers, I think, was it new, Lynn? The faith piece of it. And Lynn is such a woman of faith. And I'm just gonna say it like this. There was a crisis where she felt uncertainty, but mostly Lynn faces life with a lot more faith than I do. She has raised the spiritual bar for me in this process, it's been great. And I can easily fall into the "Where are You, God?" pit. You know, I can easily start to feel like God is gone. He has vanished.

I mean, I was trying to make a little list of times in my life that I felt that I remember after starting a new job, a new teaching job that I fell into that pit and God seemed to have vanished. After a relationship ended that was important to me. I fell in the pit. God seemed to have vanished. When my kids do something that breaks my heart, I can fall into that pit and go “God, where are You?” And you know, the truth is – and Lynn feels this too – let's just say it. It is hard to serve an invisible God. Because we were so dependent on our senses, and we can't experience Him with those five senses the way that we do the rest of our material world. But even so, even though he is invisible, He is present and He is good. And he becomes visible to us when we watch for His work, and when we're committed to his timing and uncertainty.

Cheri Gregory

Thank you both so much for sharing. I know that our friends who are listening are going to find both of your stories and perspectives – I'm going to say comforting, but not in the sense of ease, but in the sense of strengthening.

So the next question I think I already know the answer to, I'll go ahead and read it, then I'll maybe tweak it a little. Is it wrong to have feelings of doubt when life is uncertain? Why or why not?

And I'll just go ahead and say that, throughout my life, I have been chastised for not having enough faith for anything that resembled doubt or questioning as being proof that I wasn't close enough to Jesus, that basically, if you didn't question or doubt, that was evidence that you were so so close to Jesus, that you didn't need to have doubts or questions. And so having doubts or questions, basically was the way somebody else watching – and if I was spiritually enough attuned, I would realize that was proof of how far I was from God, which is kind of hard when God gives you a mind that questions naturally, and just spits out questions and doubts as soon as you open your eyes.

So talk to us about this. What's the relationship of feelings of doubt? And, you know, how do you know when maybe it is wrong, and problematic, and what do we do with it, for those of us who might be more naturally inclined that direction?

Amy Carroll

I've actually come to have a growing love for uncertainty. And I'm gonna say something this a little counterintuitive, because man, our Christian world right now loves some certainty. But I heard a quote that I have has really been working on me. And it's “Just because you're certain doesn't mean you're right.”

Cheri Gregory

(Laughs) Could you say that again for those in the back?

Amy Carroll

(Laughs) And I'm saying it to myself. This is not an unknown author, but so good. "Just because you're certain doesn't mean you're right." And, but the Christian world is just grasping for certainty right now. And I think we do that for good reasons, because being certain makes us feel safe. And being uncertain makes us feel wobbly and unsafe. But I heard an interview the other day that has convinced me even more deeply that I believe that uncertainty is an essential element of faith. And because it embraces the mystery of God. And when we try to erase the mystery of God, we have stepped out of our lane, as human beings, because we cannot erase the mystery of God. And we saw this even in, Cheri, you and I used a manuscript development team, and Lynn and I did too. And there were several times that Lynn and I wrote things and like, we talked about different sides, and then we left it up in the air. And every time we did it, we got major feedback, people did not like that. They wanted to know the answer. Is it A, B, or C? And saying, "Well, there's A, B, or C, we don't really know, it's part of the mystery of that." It did not sit well with people. And it was fascinating. But part of faith is embracing the mystery of God and thus embracing uncertainty.

Lynn Cowell

I completely agree with Amy. I think our Western thinking is obsessed with answers. And even deeper than that, the right answers. And so I know that I was taught from early on that when you read, you look for answers, right? You look for context, clues to important questions, you look for who, what, where, when, and why, and especially why, it's like the most important answer. So why is why so important? And I think it's because we are so uncomfortable with uncertainty and doubt. And I think that if we can have the answer, then we feel like the answer will erase all of our uncertainty. It'll erase our doubt because doubt is bad.

And yet I'll tell you this gal, who wants to know all the answers, is beginning to see something. And that is that when we have to know the answers to all of our whys, it leaves out something or someone very important, it leaves out God. You know, I looked up what is the definition of doubt, and the definition doubt includes uncertainty. It means according to dictionary.com, a feeling of uncertainty about the truth, reality or nature of something. So wouldn't doubt, or a feeling of uncertainty, simply be an indication of our humanity? That God is God, and we are not.

And this is one of the greatest things that makes up the difference between who we are and who God is. He alone knows all things, and we could never and will never know everything. And that's exactly what what Amy was saying, is we need to kind of go back in time, sort of, and be more comfortable with the mystery of God. There's definitely times in history where those who were Christ's followers were more comfortable with mystery than we were.

And, you know, Esther, definitely when she went before the King, she didn't know how it was going to turn out. There was there was a whole lot of uncertainty, but her obedience to do that was a part of her worship. And so I think the same is true with us, that we pursue faith, you know, it's exactly what Hebrews 11:1 says, that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." So if we don't need faith, well, then we don't have faith. I mean, that just sounds kind of crazy, but then it's not faith anymore. It's just simply understanding. It's simply knowledge instead of being faith in what we can't see.

Cheri Gregory

Well, I think you've both said the same thing in different words. And I think the whole mystery of God and recognition of our own humanity go hand in hand, but especially those of us who are recovering perfectionist and people pleasers, we really don't like either of those, you know, because the one is too squishy, 'the mystery of God,' oh, that sounds so fluffy. And the recognition of our humanity is like, "Where's my paper bag? I need to hyperventilate into it." But that really is the only option.

Amy, you were talking earlier about. We want heroes and villains. And when it comes down to it, we really, we have three options. Okay, there's God, there's the devil, and there's being human. And at the moment we're no longer willing to be human, we're vying for one of the two. And we can't be God. Yeah, that was a realization that came a few weeks ago. You're welcome.

Amy Carroll

That is great. I'm gonna have to borrow that, Cheri, thank you.

Cheri Gregory

There is no option where we get to be one step below God, but not human. Like that's, we keep striving for it. But it's it's not biblical.

Alright. So how do you prepare ahead of time? This is a great, great question. How do you prepare ahead of time for periods of God's silence? I feel like, you

know, at this stage of life, I should no longer be blindsided by things that happen regularly. And I'm learning to be more intentional about preparing, rather than just hoping it will never happen again. So we'd love any guidance you have on this.

Lynn Cowell

You're just going right in the direction that I was gonna go, Cheri. I know for me, when I feel like God is silent, I can be caught off guard, like, oh, I didn't know that was coming. And yet, if we read our Bibles, silence is coming. It's consistent in the Bible, from all kinds of accounts, that silence is normal. The Israelites, God's people between the Old Testament and the New Testament experienced hundreds of years of silence. And God had given his word through the prophets, that He wasn't saying anything new for a long time. As Jesus hung on the cross, He experienced silence.

And something just came to me that just is pricking me is like, God's silence doesn't mean He was disapproving. He was so approving of what Jesus was doing. And so today, there are people who are in prison for their faith. There's, there's the mom dropping in bed at night exhausted, all kinds of people experience God's silence. And I believe that this is one reason that in His wisdom, that God has given us the directive to hide his Word in our heart.

You know, he tells us in Psalms 119:11, "I've hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against You." And maybe the sin that the writer is referring to is the sin of giving up believing when God's not speaking. So having His word hidden in our heart may be the words that we need to hear when it feels as though God is silent.

Like when my dad was dying, you know, God's word, had already told me "I will never leave you or forsake you." And even though my heart was broken, and I wasn't sitting in that hospital with my Bible in front of me, His word came up out of me because I had hidden his word in my heart that I could draw upon it when He was silent.

Amy Carroll

So good. So good, Lynn. I love this idea of normalizing God's silence. I started thinking about in terms of our human relationships. And when you have silence with someone that you love and that you're close to, it's not always an indication – sometimes it is, and sometimes it is with God, right? I mean, sometimes we need to seek that out, like God, is there something you want to show me? But it's not always a sign that it's something wrong. Sometimes it's a sign of deep intimacy, and love, and a level of comfort, that there can be a silence.

And I remember talking years ago to a woman that had gotten saved in her early 20s out of a hugely dysfunctional situation. And she talked about how at the beginning of her relationship with God, she saw miracle after miracle after miracle after miracle, God was speaking, God was speaking, God was speaking. And she said, then in her maturity, that God was very quiet. And she was not seeing miracles anymore. And she said, "I've thought about that a lot." And she said, "I think it's because that God loves me, and that He trusts me. And that He is building my faith sometimes through his silences." And I love that because I think that happens in human relationships. And maybe it's just a reflection of the relationship we also have with God when we are in a really intimate close space with Him.

Amy

Friends, we so appreciate you tuning in each and every week.

Cheri

And we're especially grateful to **Lynn Cowell** and **Amy Carroll** for making this week's episode of Grit 'n' Grace possible!

Amy

Check out this episode's webpage at <https://gritnegracegirls.com/episode267/>

Cheri

There you'll find this week's *transcript*, a link to Lynn and Amy's new Bible study ***Esther: Seeing Our Invisible God in an Uncertain World***, and a link to their book's website, where you'll find a free resource for those of you who order during the month of July! Amy, tell us a bit about it!

Amy

"A Deeper Dive into Esther" is a resource to accompany the Bible study for those who like to go deeper yet. You can find all about this BONUS resource and the book at <https://estherbookstudy.com/>.

Cheri

Be sure to join us next week for Part 2 of our conversation with Lynn Cowell and Amy Carroll! ...

Amy

... as we continue our conversation about ***Esther: Seeing Our Invisible God in an Uncertain World.***

Cheri

For today, grow your grit ...

Amy

... embrace God's grace ...

Cheri

... and as God reveals the **next step** to live your ONE life well ...

Amy

... we'll be cheering you on ...

Amy 'n' Cheri

So TAKE IT!